

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 582

PS 028 745

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TITLE Silver Threads among the Gold: An Exploration of Elementary Schools' Learning Environments.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; *College Students; *Educational Environment; Elementary Education; Higher Education; Qualitative Research; Student Attitudes; Student Journals; *Teacher Education Programs
IDENTIFIERS Ecological Perspective; *Field Based Programs

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used an ecological approach to explore teacher education students' experiences in elementary learning environments and the meaning placed upon those experiences by the students. Participating in the study were 24 university students in their first quarter of a field-based teacher preparation program. Data were obtained from 11 of the students' focused journal entries. Journal entry texts were analyzed and categorized as illustrating one of six characteristics of classrooms: immediacy, publicness, history, multidimensionality, unpredictability, and simultaneity. Further analysis focused on finding patterns that emerged from the classroom characteristics. Findings suggested that many classroom experiences reflected elements of more than one characteristic and that the characteristics were not independent of one another. Stories from students' journals highlighted the ways students encountered and experienced the elementary classroom environments. Discussion of the findings focused on whether the university learning environment can provide the rich context in which students can experience, act, reflect, and react to events that simulate the six classroom characteristics. It was concluded that each characteristic has elements or aspects that probably can be addressed in university-based programs through the use of case methods and story telling. In-depth practice and application can most reliably occur as a result of field experiences where students can directly encounter the often hectic and chaotic nature of elementary classrooms. (The focused journal format is appended.) (KB)

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Silver Threads Among the Gold:
An Exploration of Elementary Schools'
Learning Environments

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American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting

April 19 - 23, 1999

Montreal, Canada

Introduction

Sitting in chairs placed in an oval design, twenty-four students are listening to each other's stories. The third grade teacher has just introduced her students to an interpersonal activity that will be used to open each day the students are in her classroom: Silver and Gold. As the teacher explains, "Think back to what has happened since we last met. If it was a positive experience, we call it a 'gold' experience. If it wasn't positive, it was a 'silver' experience. Share with your classmates your silver or gold experiences. If you don't want to contribute, just say, 'Pass.'" With those instructions, the students begin sharing their silver and gold experiences.

What is interesting to note is that these twenty-four students sitting in that classroom are preservice teachers enrolled in the first quarter of "Merge," a pilot, field-based teacher preparation program at Central Washington University. The third grade teacher is instructing them in language arts and social studies methods in her own elementary classroom and is modeling her way of getting to know her students by using the same technique with the university students.

We are sitting in this elementary classroom as observers engaged in documenting and assessing the development and implementation of the field-based program. Although this initial research was conducted several years ago, the

students' experiences and their responses continue to intrigue us.

The purpose of this study is to explore university students' experiences in elementary learning environments and the meaning placed upon those experiences by the students. We are centering our discussion of these experiences around six characteristics of classrooms posited by Walter Doyle (1980; 1985). Doyle suggests that common to every classroom are the characteristics of immediacy, publicness, history, multidimensionality, unpredictability, and simultaneity. Doyle (1979) further suggests that an ecological "approach to research on teaching would postulate that long-term experience in a complex setting would foster strategies to deal with environmental demands" (p. 193).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for the design, data collection, and data analysis in this study. The focus was primarily on the use of narrative (Beath 1991; Bowman, 1987; Clandinin, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1992). We looked at the stories the university students told as they negotiated their way through the first quarter of a field-based teacher preparation program. Journal entries written by the university students were the major data source for our discussion. For this study we revisited journals written for the previous study that focused on the assessment of the "Merge" program (Beath, Bowman, Elaine & Rizzuti, 1994). We called the journals "focused," as they were formatted in a way that

moderately shaped the students' reflections about their experiences (see Appendix for focused journal format). The notion that journals could be used as an effective data collection tool was borrowed from previous studies using a similar format (Bowman, 1987; Hall, Johnson & Bowman, 1995). This particular format worked well with our theme of silver and gold, as it focused the students' responses on the contrasting thrills and pitfalls of becoming a teacher.

We looked at the journals from eleven of the original twenty-four students, choosing to select those journals which contained detailed narratives. As we revisited those journals, we gathered from the texts narratives which exemplified the six characteristics of classrooms.

We approached the data analysis in two stages. We first examined the narratives to see if they appropriately illustrated the six characteristics. We found that some examples from the journals could be interpreted as describing more than one characteristic. For example, multidimensionality and simultaneity had overlapping qualities. When overlapping occurred, we selected the most likely category with a note that overlapping was apparent.

In stage two of our analysis we concentrated on finding the patterns which emerged from the six characteristics. Instead of looking at discrete narratives, we looked across the narratives, one characteristic at a time. In the following section we discuss the six classroom

characteristics which leads into our interpretation of the students' narratives.

Theoretical Framework

In 1980 Walter Doyle wrote a booklet summarizing research about classroom management where he characterizes the complex classroom environment by describing six features: immediacy, publicness, multidimensionality, unpredictability, history, and simultaneity. Doyle argues that these six characteristics in the "classroom setting have distinctive properties affecting participants regardless of how students are organized for learning or what educational philosophy the teacher espouses" (1985, p. 394).

Doyle's six classroom characteristics evolved from his interest in studying classrooms from an ecological perspective. His aim was to explore alternatives beyond the process-product research focusing on individuals and "models of causality...(where) teaching variables are assumed to cause student behavior" (1979, p. 185). Rather, Doyle was interested in an "ecological analysis of teaching...(where) an attempt is made to account for the actions of teachers and students in terms of the demands of classroom environments" (p. 189).

These demands of classroom environments, according to Doyle, can be viewed as classroom task structures "defined in terms of a goal and operation to achieve the goal" (1979, p. 202), which "reflect both the multiple purposes of the school as an institution and the variety of individual

interests and capabilities of students and teachers" (p. 193). Furthermore, classroom environments, "are not single-purpose 'learning' environments. By their very nature they afford a variety of opportunities for student engagement" (p. 193).

These six characteristics, argues Doyle, are "intrinsic features of the classroom environment that create constant pressures that shape the task of teaching. Although their intensity varies with particular conditions, these pressures operate in all classrooms" (1985, p. 395).

Specifically, multidimensionality, refers to the many-faceted nature of classrooms where different tasks must be accomplished, roles fulfilled and demands met. As Doyle describes it, "A classroom is a crowded place in which many people with different preferences and abilities must use a restricted supply of resources to accomplish a broad range of social and personal objectives...choices are never simple" (1985, p. 394).

Simultaneity refers to the fact that classrooms are busy places with many things occurring at once. Teachers oversee a small reading group while other students are engaged in seat work or working through learning centers. Teachers are required to perform several tasks at the same time. As Doyle explains, "During a discussion, a teacher must listen to student answers, watch other students for signs of comprehension or confusion, formulate the next question, and scan the class for possible misbehavior" (1985, p. 394).

The third characteristic of immediacy refers to "the rapid pace of classroom events" (Doyle, 1985, p. 394). Along with the many things occurring in a classroom, events also occur that the teacher must attend to without the possibility of reflection prior to action. Students need answers before they can continue their project. Teachers must act immediately to stop potentially dangerous behaviors before they escalate.

The characteristic of unpredictability refers to the unplanned nature of classroom events where distractions and interruptions frequently occur. No matter how carefully a teacher has planned and organized daily lessons there is always an element of surprise. From a student's question that offers the "teachable moment," to the emergency firedrill that interrupts classroom lessons, a teacher can never be certain that everything will go as planned.

Publicness describes the condition where a teacher's behavior and actions are viewed by a large portion of the students. What a teacher does in a classroom is usually observed by more than one student. Consequently, the teacher's behavior toward one student is observed by others and can frame how individuals expect to be treated.

The final characteristic, history, illuminates how teachers and students interact over a period of time, sharing mutual experiences and thereby "accumulate a common set of experiences, routines, and norms which provide a foundation for conducting activities" (Doyle, 1985, p. 395). Teachers

and students interact differently at the beginning of the term than at the end. Specific calendar events, seasonal changes, and holidays affect how classroom participants interact with each other.

Interpretive Discussion

Using the six characteristics as filters, we analyzed the students' journals for stories of ways that they encountered or addressed examples of each element. During our analysis we discovered that each characteristic could not always be cleanly separated from others. Indeed, many classroom experiences reflected elements of more than one characteristic. We also discovered that these characteristics paired up well with at least one other characteristic. For example, publicness characterizes the multiple interactions teachers experience with all of those they come into contact during their daily interactions. As these public interactions occur over a period of time, the mutual experiences build upon each other to become a form of history. Similarly, immediacy and unpredictability share elements that reflect the unplanned nature of classroom environments where events occur and must be addressed without time for reflection prior to action. Multidimensionality and simultaneity also share overlapping aspects mirroring the busy nature of elementary classrooms.

In the following section we discuss the six characteristics using illustrations from the students'

journals to highlight the ways students encountered and experienced the elementary classroom environments.

Publicness

Publicness is a complex characteristic of learning environments. Our preservice teachers faced public scrutiny in the elementary classrooms, as well as in other settings common to teachers. These other settings are also learning environments for our preservice teachers.

In the classroom, Allen found out the consequences of his actions when,

I said a bad word. Sounds corny, but I think I used very poor judgment using it at that time. On Monday I was feeling very uncomfortable with the heat and said, under my breath, how much it all "sucked." Well, little Allison heard me say it and just as soon as I looked over her work, she said, "Gosh, the math just sucks, too!"

On another day, Allen again recognized that he was on display.

I fell asleep during the play. My reaction to this was not good. Not a very good job of modeling. Lucky for me that the lights were off and no one noticed as well. Now I know why teachers drink coffee all the time!

The preservice teachers are also in the public eye when they leave the classroom for other teachers' gathering places. Unless all of the teachers in the building have been carefully apprised of the nature of the field-based program,

the preservice teachers can have a negative experience. For example, Cynthia had a "silver" experience when,

I went to an after school meeting about inclusion. I asked a question about where the students who are special education go during the day. This was still unclear to me. One of the special education teachers answered me, but in a very snappy tone. I stopped inquiring.

Likewise, Nancy describes her experience in the school workroom.

I had an incident today in which I felt less like a teacher. We have been doing a lot of copying and laminating for Ms. M and Mrs. J. Today, I was laminating vocabulary cards and I had a teacher question what I was doing. I feel like these teachers are questioning our motives and to me, that is not what teaching is all about. We are here to help these teachers, as well as learn, and I wish they would realize that!

Another aspect of publicness is the way that the elementary students are made aware of who these new adults are. The university students are often not in control of how they will be introduced publicly and consequently will not be able to control the initial and long-term perceptions of the elementary students. Rebecca stated one example of a "gold" introduction.

We met the children today and introduced as teachers. They were wonderful children and accepted us into the

class without any problems. Doris and I worked with the youngsters painting Humpty Dumpty, and we had a ball. Later, I worked one-on-one with a child who needed a little extra help with his writing.

History

The characteristic of history overlaps with publicness in that history is shaped by the public interactions of teachers and students. In the same way, history shapes future public interactions. The preservice teachers are sometimes surprised by the way the elementary students receive them. What they do not always recognize is that the nature of previous public interactions has contributed to that reception.

In response to a "gold" reception from the students, Theresa wrote,

I worked in Mrs. J's third grade class and actively participated in their centers. The children asked me questions and I felt that I was giving them the help and attention they needed. It made me feel closer to the kids. They're starting to recognize me and I'm getting to know them more, so it makes it more personal. I really felt good today like I was helping and I saw a wide variety of their day, not just one hour and one subject.

Allen, also, has a positive reaction to, and has started to create a strategic repertoire from, the way he and the students have interacted for a couple of weeks.

I am very comfortable with the students now, and have a real good grasp on the dynamic of each individual in the class. I've recognized the students who I can use to keep the class orderly and I have also identified those who need extra attention or those who tend to cause a little trouble now and then. These past two weeks have been filled with a variety of situations where I have had to step in and deal with them.

Experiences I'm sure I'll have to deal with in the future. I have learned ways of handling problems that may arise in the classroom and have found successful ways on how to deal with them, but also how to prevent them before they occur.

In addition to the way that history contributes to the way students and teachers interact, history also shapes the way the preservice teachers think about themselves as teachers. For example, Theresa describes how she is beginning to think of herself as a teacher.

I feel like I'm starting to get to know the kids better and I'm trying to get the right balance. I facilitated a reading group and I didn't let them get away with things, so they knew that I was serious. This made me feel as if I was in control and that I was a teacher figure. I like getting respect, but I don't want them hating me.

Not all of the preservice teachers were so confident about themselves. Time, or history, in the classroom is one

factor that contributes to confidence. Another, as previously mentioned, is the way that the preservice teachers are introduced to their class. It appears that, for Francis, that lack of confidence is probably due to a short time in the classroom. She relates a couple of early experiences.

I got to take three kids into the hall to do some oral reading. It was great to be able to work with a small group of kids on a specific task instead of just wandering around the room.

Francis also relates a "silver" self image when she says,

They needed an adult to proofread their mystery stories, but they would all wait for the teacher to come by instead of asking us. I felt like I wasn't good enough for the kids to ask me for help.

Nancy, on the other hand, displayed a "gold" self image as she reflected on the kind of teacher she is becoming.

Today a couple little boys were jumping up and down and becoming overly excited to be in my reading group. I was glad that they liked me so much, but it also makes me feel more like a special visitor than a teacher. My reaction to this was at first positive; I was extremely happy that the kids had taken a liking to me. Then I began to feel bad like I was not so much their teacher as I was their friend. I am now feeling better about the situation. I have realized that I can be their good friend as well as help them with their reading. In fact, I feel that it is more beneficial that they do consider

me a friend because they are also able to trust me a little more. These few students do not have a lot of confidence with their reading, but when they are around me I see them shining a little brighter. I am glad that I am dealing with these situations now and not the first day of student teaching. I also hope that when I become a teacher that all my students will consider me a friend as well as an educator.

Immediacy

These preservice teachers were placed directly into elementary classrooms without any previous education classes or prior field experiences. Their journals reflect situations they encountered in which they needed to respond with no time to prepare and no foundation from which to make their judgments. These encounters fell into three categories of inadequate content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and classroom management strategies.

Allen describes two "silver" situations where he is expected to have an immediate response and is unable to meet those demands. In the first example, Allan relates,

I helped out the third graders in their centers.

At the math and spelling center I felt very unprepared when they asked questions on how to do the problems.

In his second example he wrote,

I was reading aloud to the kids today. I was responsible for reading the story aloud and asking

questions about the story and discussing difficult words also. I couldn't come up with very good definitions for some of the vocabulary words. Either couldn't think of a definition very quickly or just couldn't think of one at all. Definitely not a highlight of the session!

Theresa's journal entries reflect similar stories and also illustrate the complex role structure for preservice teachers.

Sometimes I don't know how to handle certain situations. For example, when I was helping a child with a story, she had some spelling mistakes so I didn't know if I should correct them or leave them. I don't feel that I know the teacher's view on handling these things, so I felt like I shouldn't do certain things without her permission.

Theresa also expresses frustration about her teaching skills.

I didn't know how to teach fractions in a way that the students would understand. It made me feel inadequate. I felt stupid that I couldn't get across to them.

Other journal entries share insights into how the preservice teachers reacted when confronted with situations that called upon their pedagogical skills. Susie writes about a "gold" experience.

I actually got through to a child. She was a first grader visiting the class. She was supposed to be writing a poem around the flower she had drawn...but she

was refusing to do her work. I simply asked the student her name, and told her that I like the pretty tulip that she had made. This was a big risk because I know from experience (my second grade brother) that if you tell the child that you like the picture of the cat that they drew and it is really a turtle, they can get pretty upset or their feelings might be hurt. So, my first step was attempting to accurately identify her picture and compliment it. Then, I helped her to think of some things about her flower. I think the main reason she started to trust me and work with me were that I treated her like a person instead of a 'kid' and that I was sensitive to her needs, which at that time seemed to be just a few simple confidence boosters.

Another "gold" example where a beginning teacher must respond without time to figure out her options was recounted by Cynthia.

I was helping a group of four students do research for a paragraph on Native American Indians. One girl was having a hard time getting involved. She was more interested in a book on sign language. My reaction to this was to use the signing to relate to the Indians. After a few minutes of her looking up words and signing them to me to write down, she took the pencil and paper from me and finished her task.

Classroom management also provides situations where the preservice teachers face challenges in deciding what to do and acting immediately. Theresa shares that

during an assembly a kid started hitting another kid and I had to handle the situation. I was a little nervous, but I felt I handled the situation well.

Cynthia relates this story.

I had to deal with three girls trying to tell a fourth that she could not play with them at recess. I told the three girls that what they were doing was unacceptable for the playground. If they want 'private secret time' they needed to have it at home; the playground is for everyone.

Unplanned events occur and must be addressed at that time. Theresa shares an example from the outdoor camp, Tall Timber, which illustrates the connection between immediacy and unpredictability. It also provides us with a sense of how experienced teachers react.

When the kids got hurt the teachers were very calm and knew how to react. I tended to overreact. Afterwards I talked to the teacher and she said that they never let the child see that they're worried or it will make the kids more upset.

Unpredictability

Unplanned events occur in classrooms all of the time. No matter how much preservice teachers are indoctrinated into lesson and unit planning, classroom management strategies,

communication and interpersonal skills, all teachers need flexibility moving through the classroom environment. Allen describes an event that is certainly not a part of the planned university environment.

I was at recess and I had to quit early because a little first grader was eating rocks. Despite telling her repeatedly to stop, she didn't, would run away and eat some more. I felt totally frustrated and powerless because she wouldn't listen to me.

Another student, Rebecca, relates a story that illustrates the connection between unpredictability and the diversity in students.

I didn't feel like a teacher today when I was unable to understand a child in class who is ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). I didn't know how to get her to do what I wanted and she threw a fit. I felt a little helpless and had to ask the teacher to help.

Allen also witnesses how a teacher works to decrease the element of unpredictability in her classroom.

I sat in on Mrs. W's introduction to camp Tall Timber. She filmed the area where they will be staying for the next couple of days and also explained the different types of plants, animals, and natural features they will see up there...I thought it was an excellent way to get her students prepared for their camping experience. We've been learning all along in the classroom that it is very important to always give your students

background information before they engage in any type of activity. I have also learned how important it is for the teacher to be prepared before initiating any activity. Mrs. B modeled this by going up to the camp site on Sunday to check and see how the conditions were so there wouldn't be any unexpected surprises by the campers or herself.

Multidimensionality

Elementary classrooms provide a rich environment for preservice teachers to become familiar with the multiple events, roles, and contexts for learning that an effective teacher must be prepared to encounter. As Allen describes an early observation.

I was able to observe and interact with the kids in various environments (in class, recess, lunch, music, PE, with first graders) and thus I was able to get a grasp on how kids act socially.

Allen also experiences the multiple instructional roles demanded by teaching.

I had a chance to have a more pivotal role in class today. I gave a spelling pretest, corrected their papers, started a lesson plan for literature groups and also a play supervisor during their field trip to watch "Elves and the Shoemaker" on campus. As we walked back to school, had to handle a few skirmishes among five of the students as well, which were handled on the spot.

Jamie also encounters the various activities that must be addressed that do not directly reflect the instructional nature of elementary classrooms.

Ms. M invited me to open up class this morning--taking attendance, doing lunch count, flag salute, calendar, etc. It was a good experience. The kids know by now that I'm aware of the rules and almost better behaved for me than Ms. M, but that is probably just my novelty.

Lorna also describes the many-faceted nature of what she is experiencing and learning.

I'm tackling behavior problems, leading songs, planning lessons, and teaching units. The students are responding to my commands, both verbal and non-verbal, and a big step is that the boys are coming to me for advice and just to show me their work. They gave me hugs and asked for my help. I also feel like I'm learning more about reading styles and how to adapt to the different learning styles and levels that are in this classroom. For instance, I know that Blaine needs a lot of step-by-step visual instruction as opposed to Elizabeth who needs to be told once.

Planning work for students who vary in ability and interests as Lorna expresses is also experienced by Danielle.

I was able to help a boy who is labeled ADD. The class was working on a writing sheet where they had to recopy sentences in cursive and to correct for spelling and

punctuation. I watched him for 30 minutes and noticed he had only done two words. I went and sat with him so see if I could help him keep on task and to understand his assignment. Within about 20 minutes he had almost completed the assignment. He is a good student, but needs someone to keep him on task long enough to understand what he is asked to do. He was pleased with what he got done...It felt good to see his response and to realize it was a positive experience for both of us. After class he came up to me and thanked me.

Reading through the students' journals it also becomes clear that they were juggling the multiple roles of student, student-teacher, and friend to their students. These multiple roles can be a source of frustration or benefit depending upon how the preservice teacher is able to incorporate professional norms into their sense of self as a teacher/educator.

Simultaneity

Closely aligned with multidimensionality is simultaneity. Not only are classrooms filled with many things, roles, and objectives, they are also busy with many things occurring at the same time. Teachers must have the capability of attending to more than one thing at a time. Camie describes her inability to address more than one event at a time. Furthermore, her reflection of what she might want to do in the future is a very poor, inappropriate choice (In

actuality, it is against Washington State law to punish a child academically for a behavior problem).

I gave a spelling test today. It went over ok, but I need to slow down during the correcting process. The kids were too loud and I had a difficult time keeping them quiet. Next time I might give a warning and follow through with taking the test away for a grade of zero for talking. When I was correcting the words on the overhead I spelled Connecticut wrong. I didn't feel bad until the kids made me feel like I was supposed to know everything when I don't.

Nancy's journal contained two excellent examples of simultaneity.

Today I opened the morning for the third grade class. I really felt like I made a difference in the life of one child. Josphine is the only Hispanic child in our class and English is her second language. Often times Josphine is left out and communication is rare between her and the other students. I asked her to help me with the morning opener by teaching the class how to count from 1 to 20 in Spanish. So, when we took the lunch count, the students counted in Spanish. We used some other Spanish language as well. Josphine had such a boost of confidence and the other students loved learning something new! I feel that there is always some way to integrate new things--culture--into the students' lives.

Nancy also experiences the instructional nature of simultaneity as she prepares her lesson plans.

Mrs. C gave me the task of arranging the weekly spelling activities for her third grade class. I spent some time exploring different activities and made a decision to introduce four that I found. I then had to come up with ways to explain the activities to the students. For example, I made overheads and had examples of the artistic activities for the students to look at. This was a gold experience, but for the first time I was able to realize how much time is spent on just one lesson. A teacher has to much to accomplish in a day's work and for me to experience this is extremely helpful.

Conclusion

As experienced teachers we all have stories about ways we have encountered the challenges inherent within these six characteristics. We have learned ways of coping with the competing demands placed upon us by the diversity of students and roles we are expected to competently, efficiently, and professionally deal with on a daily basis. We have a repertoire of strategies to guide us through those on-the-spot decisions that must be made in order to work through our daily teaching assignments.

However, as teacher-educators we ponder ways in which to assist our preservice teachers to develop teaching strategies, decision-making skills, and mechanisms to address these characteristics of classroom environment. As Doyle

states, "Beginning teachers face the difficult problem of learning these demands and developing ways to manage them effectively" (1980, p. 9).

As we explored the students' stories, we pondered the differences and similarities between the lived experiences of university students in elementary learning environments and the more laboratory-centered experiences of a traditional university setting. We also deliberated over whether or not we can provide, in the university learning environment, the rich context in which students can experience, act, reflect, and react to events that simulate the six classroom characteristics.

Our conclusion is that each characteristic has elements or aspects that probably can be addressed in university-based programs, albeit on a surface level, through the use of case methods and story telling. We in the university environment can help our students to become aware of these classroom characteristics and the variety of ways of addressing each. However, in-depth practice and application can probably only occur as a result of field experiences where students can directly encounter the often hectic and chaotic nature of elementary classrooms.

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Appendix

Integrated Elementary Education Pilot Program (Merge)

Focused Journal Format

Name: _____

Date: _____

Today I felt more like I was becoming a teacher when...

My reaction to this was...

Today I did not feel like I was becoming a teacher when...

My reaction to this was...